

# VERA CLARKE IFILL

## *Oral History, EDITED VERSION*

Birth Date: May 4, 1914

Interview DP-28 by Andrew Phillips on May 23, 1989

Immigrated from Barbados at the age of 7

Arrived January 25, 1921 on *The Vestris*



**Read the oral history. Jot down answers to the questions as you go along. Then discuss the answers in your group.**

*Your dramatic skit will focus mostly on the hardships that Vera faced **after** coming to the United States. Think about how her skills or personality helped her face her challenges.*

**PHILLIPS:** This is interview number 402 [DP-28]. This is Andrew Phillips, and I'm speaking with Vera Clarke... Ifill?

**IFILL:** Ifill (*EYE-fill*). Like the Eiffel Tower.

**PHILLIPS:** She emigrated from Barbados. Tell us what your parents did for a living.

**IFILL:** Well, when I was born, my mother had, and my father had already immigrated to the United States. And my mother was pregnant with me and she came home to Barbados, and I was born there. My father had studied to be a carpenter with my grandfather. They came to America about 1904, 1905. It was almost impossible to find any kind of work for black people at that time, so whatever jobs were available that's what my parents did.

**PHILLIPS:** Why did they leave Barbados?

**IFILL:** Well, if you know Barbados, you wouldn't ask that question. It's a very small island, it's about twelve miles square, a hundred and forty-four square miles. It's densely populated, and it has one of the highest rates of literacy in the world, so there is no place to go but out, once you have reached maturity.

**PHILLIPS:** Was that common for parents to leave their children back at home in Barbados and travel to America or elsewhere?

**IFILL:** Well, my sisters, they were born in America. My mother had taken them home when she came home with me, because it's not that easy in a foreign country. And, especially because World War One, for a black person to be able to get a decent job, and even decent housing. So it was easier for the parents to send the children back to their grandparents. People still do those things today. They send the children home. In some cases they may do it because...of finances. In some cases they may feel that the children may get a better education. Because under the British system the education was better. It still is.

**PHILLIPS:** What do you remember about that side of life in Barbados?

**IFILL:** Oh, what I remember was the, um, the distinction between the British, the white British and the blacks. [NOTE: Barbados was a colony of Great Britain. It gained its independence in 1966.] There was this "touch-me-not" sort of thing. It was as though you were dealing in two different worlds because the blacks were sort of like untouchables, and we, as blacks, felt just the opposite. We felt that we were superior. So it was bewildering to me as a child, not to be able to understand why there was that distinction. So there was that feeling of, on our part, of disdain. Yet, at the same time, the people who owned and lived on the plantation, they kept themselves aloof from the average black individual, or natives, or whatever you want to call them. But one thing, we all had the same accent. ( she laughs )

We [blacks] had a slang word. I later learned in life that it was an African word. We would call them "Poor Backra Misses." And, um, about 1982 I visited Sierra Leone and I found out that [the] languages that I had heard as a child was the same language that they were speaking in Sierra Leone. I learned that some of the Sierra Leone[an]s had gone back to Barbados.

Why did Vera's parent leave Barbados?

How does Vera describe race relations back in Barbados, between the white British people and blacks?

**PHILLIPS:** So, because your family, your mother and father were living in the United States, at a certain point it was decided that you would go to the United States.

**IFILL:** What happened was first my grandfather died, and then my grandmother, so then there was no one there to take care of us...It was myself, my sister Edna, my sister Inez, my cousin Ebert and my nephew Ernest, five of us. And my mother brought home my youngest sister, was a year old at that time, Elaine...She came home in 1920, and we left in January of 1921.

**PHILLIPS:** So what was it like leaving Barbados?

**IFILL:** Well, I remember going to board the ship. At that time, it did not have a harbor where you could dock the boats. So you had to get into one of these little rowboats and they row you out there and you have to climb aboard on the ship. So that was a terrifying experience to us children because we had never had done anything like that before. The ship name was the *Vestris* and I don't know where it had come from before it docked in Barbados, but it was headed for New York, and that's where we went.

**PHILLIPS:** Do you remember arriving in the harbor in New York?

**IFILL:** No. That's one thing I don't remember, but I do remember...It was the first time I had been on board the ship, and since it was such a hard time for my mother, she sold the property, and she got very little for it, and it was very hard for her to be able to afford anything no more than third class, down in the steerage.

**PHILLIPS:** Was this because of racial discrimination?

**IFILL:** No, money. ( she laughs ) You stayed where you paid for. We were down in this large room, down in the very hold of the ship, and there was several other people in it. We didn't have a private room. And you were in, uh, three layers of beds, one on top of the other. So it was not, uh, there because of choice. We'd just be there because we didn't have the money to go anyplace else.

I don't think we had the proper clothing, because this was January and this was a warm climate we were leaving, and we all got sick, frostbitten, whatnot. My sister Inez, she became frostbitten. She couldn't walk. It was so cold. And, as I said, we weren't prepared for it.

Before we left Barbados we all had to be inoculated for smallpox. And my vaccination didn't take. So when we got to Ellis Island, I had to be vaccinated again. It still didn't take. When I got ready to go to school, I had to be vaccinated again. What the doctors didn't realize, the reason it didn't take [is] because I had already had smallpox, and I was immune to it. But they didn't know that much in those days, so they vaccinated me three times. ( she laughs )

**PHILLIPS:** When you got to Ellis Island you said that you didn't remember arriving.

**IFILL:** What I remember was that we went in this place and we were herded like we were cattle. I remember that. And we all felt very indignant about the treatment and whatnot. And there were a mass of people. I don't know where they had come from. And we were all in this room and we were like in cages. And we had to be herded there and kept there. And my mother didn't know why we should have been because she had been just gone a few months and my sisters and whatnot, they had all been born in this country. But anyway, they kept them there because of me, I think it was. I wasn't a citizen and, um, and my [vaccination for] smallpox hadn't taken, so they kept us there. And it was just one human mass of people. Bewildered, black and white, people who weren't speaking English, couldn't understand each other, but all afraid of each other. And, um, it was just, to me it was just horrible.

**PHILLIPS:** You say that it was a horrible experience. You were there amongst people of all different nationalities, languages and races. How long did you stay on Ellis Island?

**IFILL:** I haven't the faintest idea. I imagine it might have been overnight because, as I said, my vaccination hadn't taken. I wasn't a citizen, although my sisters were. And I think they held us, held us over. And they vaccinated me again. ( she laughs )

Why didn't the children have the right clothes for winter when they arrived?

What did Vera need to have to enter the US? Why did she have to get it three times?

**PHILLIPS:** Then had you seen your father yet?

**IFILL:** No, no. I didn't see him till we went to where they were living. They were living in the Bronx, and we went there, and that's when I first saw my father. I had never seen him before in my life.

**PHILLIPS:** What did you think when you first arrived [and moved to the Bronx]?

**IFILL:** Well, I know I remember the cold. It was so cold, and I don't think we had the proper clothing, as far as I can remember. And that was my first sensation, of being so cold. And then being bewildered, strange, you know. You're taken out of a setting that you had lived all your life and with certain surroundings, and here you are a foreigner in a foreign country. We arrived with this accent, and, um, unfortunately for us, we got there in January and my father got killed in May. And immediately that set in motion an entirely different life that we might have had if he had not been killed.

**PHILLIPS:** How was he killed?

**IFILL:** He was killed, uh, hit over the head with a baseball bat. He was murdered. He, he had, and his friends, they like to play cricket. And on Sunday they would go to this place in Harlem and would play cricket. It was a Sunday afternoon. And there must have been another group playing baseball. There was a man selling bananas. One of the young men must have swiped a banana and I guess my father saw him and they got in an argument. Then my father went and sat down on the side and the guy came up behind him and hit him over the head with a baseball bat and got three years for it. After my father died we had absolutely no place to go, no money.

**PHILLIPS:** So what did you do?

**IFILL:** Well, my mother had a cousin that was managing a building and had a storeroom. And we went to live in this storeroom without her cousin telling the landlord about it. And we were down there I don't know how long and, um, the meters for the apartments were down there, so the guy had to come into the area where we were to read the meters and I think he reported it. So my mother had to find a place for us to stay. It was just like that, going from place to place, trying to find some place to live.

So whatever job she could get, whether it was cleaning houses, or laundry, she would pay for some place, and many nights [when] we went to bed we didn't have enough to eat. We got up and went to school the next day without anything to eat. This would go on for weeks at times.

We moved from different places because we were always one jump ahead of the landlord, the fact of the money. It was not very comfortable for us because we had an accent, so the kids in school would make fun of us and call us monkey chasers. It was just the children didn't even know any better. It's just that all kids were more or less would make fun of other children if they're different, without really understanding why they're different, or even knowing why they're mocking them, or anything like that. They're different. And here you are in an area where the accent is southern black, and suddenly you hear this Caribbean thing that you can't understand. And it calls for a lot of ill will and ill feeling.

**PHILLIPS:** So what was school like for you?

**IFILL:** School was all right for me. I liked school. I liked to learn. I liked to read, and that was no problem. But I had bad eyesight, and my mother couldn't afford to get any glasses for me, and I couldn't see the blackboard, and then be a little bit ashamed to tell the teacher I can't see what you're writing. But I liked school.

**PHILLIPS:** So what, tell us a little bit about that school experience.

**IFILL:** I went through from the first grade up to the ninth grade there in Manhattan. At that time the schooling was much better than it is today. You selected a particular area where you want to go in. Either what they call commercial or vocational or onto academic. And I had selected commercial, that I would do bookkeeping.

I should not have been placed in the first grade because it put me a whole year behind my peers. But the American system is such that they always think that nobody has as good an education as the American system, which is not right, and they always put the kids from the other countries back. That was a disadvantage, because I was a year behind my peer group.

[But for] a black person going to school and getting an education, [then] coming out and getting a decent job, was impossible. The teachers would tell us, "Why are you taking this class" in typing or bookkeeping or whatever that I was taking. "You can't get a job when it's all over." That's what the teacher told us. When I say us, I mean blacks like myself.

**PHILLIPS:** A white teacher?

**IFILL:** Yes. And the Puerto Ricans and the Cubans, because I had a mixture of kids in my class. Those were the days when you had Jewish, Irish, Italians, and others living in Harlem. It wasn't just all black. I came up in an integrated schooling. There was just, at that time, very few blacks in the schools that I went to. They were predominantly White. But the teachers had no compulsion to tell you, "Why are you striving for a good education? You have no way of using this education." It was very discouraging because you want to get an education, but the doors were closed to you. After you got the education, you still might not be able to get a job.

How does her father's murder change the life of Vera's family?

Why did the children at school make fun of her? Do you think this was because her family was black or because they were Caribbean immigrants?

Did her teachers encourage her to succeed? Why or why not?

**PHILLIPS:** What happened after that?

**IFILL:** What happened after that? I had to go to work. I wanted to be a doctor, but the funds wasn't there to send me on to get my education, so I had to go to work, get a job. I went working in a laundry, and I got hurt. I broke my toe and the nail, and in those days it was hard for you to lay claim to anything and get truly compensated. The system is still rotten when it comes to Workmen's Comp. Anyway it wasn't, uh, that pleasant.

**PHILLIPS:** So you got married. What work did you get, eventually?



**IFILL:** Well, I decided that I was going to get training and get off the welfare system. So I went and took a class in sewing. I learned to be a sewing operator, machine operator, and the war broke out at that time. And my oldest daughter developed rheumatic fever, and that's how I came to California [for her daughter's health].

Now what I'm doing is I'm running a credit union. I'm right back to square one, where the teacher said you couldn't do bookkeeping and typing. That's what I'm doing now. I'm managing a credit union.

**PHILLIPS:** How long have you been doing that?

**IFILL:** Well, my husband started this credit union thirty-four years ago. [The] Caribbean-American Credit Union. Originally it started in my home. We were chartered in March of 1955, so we're in our 35th year, going into our 35th year.

**PHILLIPS:** Why did he start the [credit] union?

**IFILL:** ...In those days, the average black, especially if you came from the Caribbean, they didn't have credit. And this town is built on credit. And, um, if they did go to any of the loan places to get credit, the loan financial institutions, banks would discriminate against them because they were blacks and they were foreigners and they had no credit. The financial companies would take advantage of them. Some of the lending rates were as high as 25 percent, while [at] the bank [it] might have been [only] three or four or five percent. So my husband started the credit union.

**PHILLIPS:** How popular was it?

**IFILL:** Well, [when] we started out initially, we got our charter, we only had fifty members. Today we have under seven hundred. And, um, we started out with less than a thousand dollars. Today we're almost at half a million.

**PHILLIPS:** Okay. Is there anything else that we should talk about in this context?

**IFILL:** I think my children is of interest. My oldest son, he works as a professor in the University of Michigan, and he lives there. He's social work, okay, mental health. And, um, my daughter, Ala, she's a realtor. And my other son, he's a banker in Minnesota. My youngest daughter works at the El Camino College as a cashier.

I have as my houseguests some people from India. I don't think the American people are aware that the Sikhs are being persecuted in India. They are experiencing a lot of turmoil in their country and the average person is not aware what's going on. They're being killed and everything else. I mean, it's a political issue. I know that it's a very painful one, and that people are not aware of it.

What work skills and personality traits helped her as an adult?

Do you believe Vera's childhood made her weaker or stronger? Explain.

What connections can you make between what happened to Vera as a child and her concern as an adult for the Sikhs of India?

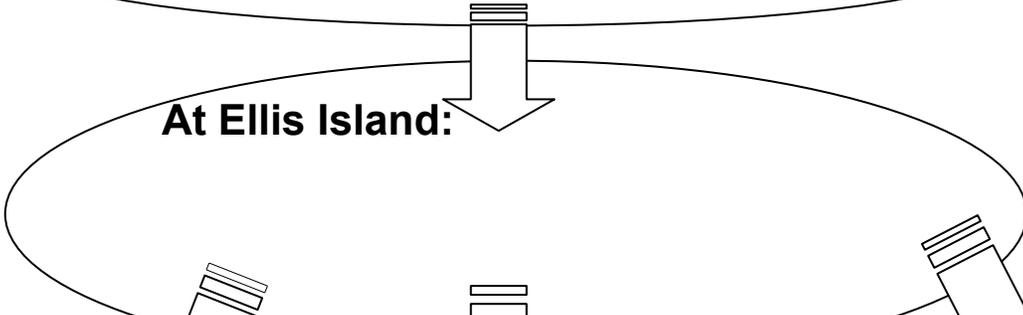
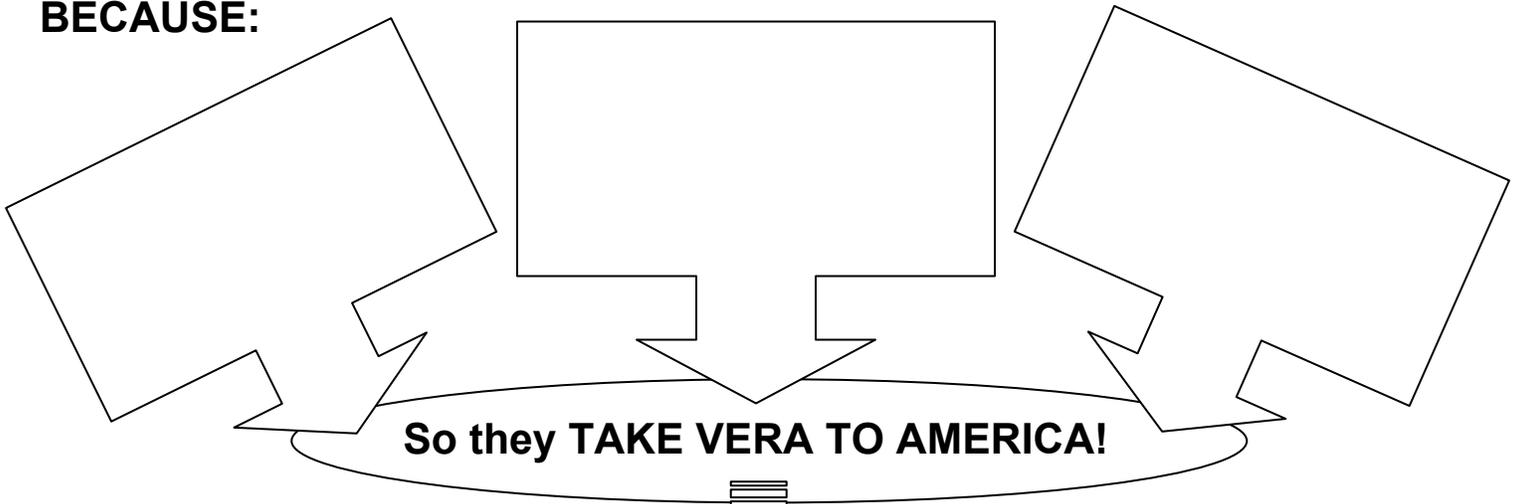
# GRAPHIC ORGANIZER for Ellis Island Oral History

**NAME** of immigrant: **Vera Clarke Ifill** **FROM:** \_\_\_\_\_

**YEAR** she came to the U.S.: \_\_\_\_\_ **AGE** when she arrives: \_\_\_\_\_

**PUSH-PULL:** Why did her family choose to leave home and come to America?

**BECAUSE:**



**After she arrives in the US:**

**AND:**

**AND:**

